

No Embargo On Advice

The West urges Lithuania to slow down

Lithuanians had been hoping for foreign intervention in their secession standoff with Moscow, but what they got last week was not what they had in mind. Winding up a summit in Paris, French President François Mitterrand and West German Chancellor Helmut Kohl urged Vilnius to resolve its crisis with Moscow "through the classic channels of dialogue." To get talks going, they suggested in a letter to Lithuanian President Vytautas Landsbergis, "it would be helpful if the effects of the decisions taken by your Parliament were suspended."

Landsbergis said he would "carefully study" the letter, but he could hardly fail to read it as support for President Mikhail Gorbachev's demands that the Baltic republic consent to an orderly secession by Moscow's rules. Landsbergis had already been stung by George Bush's decision not to impose economic sanctions on the Soviet Union—a decision the Lithuanian leader likened to the appeasement of Hitler at the 1938 Munich conference. The comparison was farfetched, since Bush was counseling Lithuania to take a less confrontational course toward independence, not to surrender to a predatory totalitarian.

With these signs that the West would not take sides with Lithuania, an antiblockade commission was set up in Vilnius to seek ways around the two-week-old oil-and-gas embargo ordered by Gorbachev. It was also exploring possible food-for-oil swaps. But with the Kremlin in control of the railroads, such schemes were unlikely to break Moscow's squeeze.

While the passion for independence still burns high, some sober-minded Lithuanians are beginning to wonder if they might have been too hasty. Prime Minister Kazimiera Prunskiene seemed to suggest that the deliberately vague terms of the Kohl-Mitterrand letter might serve as a vehicle for compromise. But the main stumbling block remains: what to do about the March 11 declaration of independence. Lithuanians are interpreting the proposed suspension to refer only to legislation passed after March 11, while Moscow reads it to include suspension of the declaration itself. The no-retreat camp still has the upper hand in Vilnius, but the artful Western nudge might help move both sides closer to talks.



Landsbergis

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